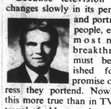
TV's Image of Older People

by Cy Brickfield

Because television drama changes slowly in its perception and portrayal of people, even the most minor breakthroughs must be cherished for the promise of progress they portend. Nowhere is this more true than in TV's portrayal of older people.



The influence of the episodic TV series constitutes a potent force for shaping images and attitudes. History's greatest teachers have always done much of their teaching through the use of stories, myths and parables; these tend to create longer-lasting impressions than simple factual recitations. In essence, the contemporary TV series is an electronic extension of that time-honored teaching tool.

Unfortunately, TV's treatment of older people in series has at times appeared more like betrayal than portrayal. Up until the early 1970's, active older people were virtually invisible on TV. If they did appear, it was usually as passive background figures or as distorted caricatures of themselves.

But gradually, older characters have begun to emerge from the background and assume some of the dominant, active roles usually reserved for young protagonists. And, on occasion, some of the more enlightened TV producers and script writers have begun to attack the pervasive myths and misconceptions about aging with the same vigor that they use to fight racist and sexist stereotypes.

One of the pioneers in the fight against the stereotyping of older people was, not surprisingly, producer Norman Lear.

In a memorable *All In The Family* episode a few years ago, the late actor Burt Mustin played an "escapee" from a nursing home who was able to figure in his head mathematical problems that a chagrined Archie Bunker couldn't solve with pencil and paper. Mustin also explained to Archie that he and his girlfriend had to live together without getting married so that their Social Security benefits would not be reduced (That was the first time, in my memory, that the plight of impoverished Social Security beneficiaries was ever discussed on a non-news or documentary television program).

Lear's handling of the courtship and marriage of "Mrs. Naugatuck," the sixty-five year old maid on the *Maude* series, also showed a sensitivity to older people that is still rare on television.

Other series producers and writers have also attacked the false perceptions of aging in America. A number of TV series —such as *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *The Practice*, and the long-running *Barnaby Jones*—have featured active older heroes in title roles.

In one particular case, it was fight against ageism on TV is Philip Fish, the dour, dyspeptic detective from the *Barney Miller* series. Fish became one of TV's funniest, most popular characters while attempting to fight off the threat of being mandatorily retired from the police force solely because of his age.

Eventually, Fish was forced to retire, and the spin-off series which bears his name chronicles his and his wife's sometimes funny, often heart-warming attempts to adjust to their new lives as foster parents to a group of "reformed" juvenile delinquents.

Fish is a good show that, with humor, empathy and, above all, reality, reveals much about retirement and growing old. And it's encouraging to note that the show's early ratings have been respectable.

Another good sign for older people has been the emergence of the daily *Over Easy* program on the Public Broadcasting System. Hosted by Hugh Downs, former long-time anchorman of the *Today* show, *Over Easy's* format is specially designed for older adults. Since the PBS network now includes more than 275 TV stations from coast-to-coast, *Over Easy* is without question the most ambitious venture ever undertaken by television on behalf of older people. And while it's more a "TV-magazine" than a series, I believe that the show will also do much to combat the false negative images of aging.

This is not to say that all is well in TV. There are still too many performers, producers and writers who seek to get a laugh by making fun of older people; among the most flagrant examples are Johnny Carson's notorious "Aunt Blabby" and the caricatures of enfeebled, senile older people on the *Carol Burnett Show*. NRTA and AARP, as well as Maggie Kuhn of the Gray Panthers and others, have spoken out strongly against such negative and unfair stereotyping.

But we are making progress. And as older Americans continue to play a more active role in real life, I'm confident that their portrayal on TV will continue to become more realistic.

(Cyril F. (Cy) Brickfield is the executive director of the non-profit, non-partisan National Retired Teachers Association and American Association of Retired Persons in Washington, D.C.)

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'Victory at Sea' Over Back-to-Back Hurricanes

Lafayette, La. — (PWS) — In their own version of "victory at sea," workers on oil drilling platforms in the Gulf of Mexico triumphed over back-to-back hurricanes, Anita and Babe.

"Everything went without a hitch," reported Jack H. Herring, senior vice president, production, U.S. and Canada, of Marathon Oil Company.

"It was quite a feat. A total of 1,048 people were involved in two evacuations by boat or helicopter."

For ten days last August and September Marathon's Gulf of Mexico crews lived and worked by emergency procedures initiated when Hurricane Anita struck, to be followed almost immediately by Hurricane Babe.

The first storm forced suspension of all drilling and some production operations. Later, the weather cleared one day, allowing some activities to start up again, only to be suspended right away.

The first inkling of Hurricane Anita came Sunday, Aug. 28 at 11 p.m. The weather service Marathon subscribes to alerted the Lafayette, La., office that there was a very strong tropical wave in the central Gulf — a dire sign that a hurricane was brewing. That triggered an emergency communications network that fanned out to each offshore location where the Company had people working.

The initial shutdown in the Gulf came Tuesday, the 30th, when 576 people were evacuated from central and western locations. All construction and drilling activities were shut down, and when the weather danger was over, started up—but only for one day. Then Hurricane Babe came rolling in. This time 472 people were brought to shore, and all Gulf activities were suspended by Saturday, the third.

"There was not one serious injury and there was no property damage," said Herring. "I think that says a lot for our training, our procedures and the calibre of our Gulf Coast crews."

(PWS)

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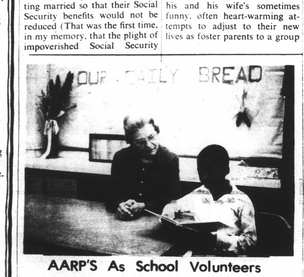

AARP'S As School Volunteers

The Pamplin chapter of the American Association of Retired People has been helping with the reading program at Pamplin Elementary School as one of their group service projects. Volunteers from the AARP come to the school to hear individual students read aloud. Here Mrs. Jane Wingfield is listening to a story read by Robert Croner. The school is appreciative of their interest and help with the instructional program.

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THEN and NOW!

Traditions of Christmas

By Frances H. Paulette

Christmas is almost here, a season of two moods, holy day and holiday. With these moods there is worship and there is much festivity; in both we find many traditions and in both we find music. We have all been a part of the tradition of Christmas caroling at the holiday season. Let's look at some of the other traditions of Christmas.

Way back THEN, in a county in North Carolina, there was a Watch Night Service held in a meeting house. This service began after an early supper and ceased only when the Christmas Star was well up in the sky on Christmas morning. At home everything, all the chores, were left at a stand still because families wanted to be with their children at midnight at the Watch Night Service on Christmas Eve. Singing was solomn until midnight when the awaited crowing of the rooster proclaimed the holy hour. It was a belief that the roosters only crowed at midnight on Christmas eve. At this signal the mood changed, the tempo of the music increased and was often accompanied by the clapping of hands and a kind of shuffling dance called "shouting". It got its name from the song called a shout - - - shout almost shouted lines and short shouted refrains. Specific rules, such as the ban on the crossing of feet, distinguished the "holy dance", from "sinful" or everyday dancing. A watchman was often appointed to see that the feet obeyed!

In one community long ago, on Christmas morning, songs called "gift songs" or "vision songs" awakened the community members an hour earlier than usual. A march was sung as they filed into the meeting house, and after the simple telling of the Christmas story, many other songs mingled with the elaborate ritual attending the bestowing of "spiritual presents".

In still another community, long ago, (possibly members of the Quaker sect) "sweeping songs" were sung to the rhythm of sweeping and brushing of the meeting rooms with brooms received from the spirits.

From out west we hear the story of the serenaders of by-gone days. They were usually boys or men going from house to house on Christmas eve or during the 12-day season, sometimes marching around and around each house two or three times. They would be singing, ringing cowbells, pounding on pans and shouting until finally the door was opened and inside there was all they hoped for - - - warmth and refreshment of apples, cakes, nuts, cider and perhaps more singing.

The first real Christmas cards appear to have been printed in London in 1846. Almost one thousand copies were printed and that was considered quite a large sale. It was not until about 1860 that the custom of using cards to convey Christmas greetings became popular, until now they are produced by the millions.

There is an old saying that if you quarrel or are cross on Christmas Day that things will go wrong for you the whole coming year.

An age old Christmas Eve tradition, once believed in by many and repeated annually, is to take a perfect specimen of an onion and cut it into halves. Peel off twelve layers (one for each month of the year to come) and fill each with salt. On the following morning the peelings which contain damp salt indicate rainy months while the peelings with dry salt will be fair months.

Some say that the poinsettia has no Christmas tradition but the story has been told so many times of a little Mexican girl on her way to church with no gift for the Christ child; she was hurt and wondering what she could possibly find to take. Suddenly her eyes saw the beautiful red poinsettias and she decided it was better to take the red flower than to go empty-handed. The story would have us believe from that day on the poinsettia was associated with Christmas.

According to an ancient belief holly berries possess and give wonderful power when worn in the shape of a wreath. It was thought that if the wearer went alone at midnight on Christmas and sat in a church in the dark, second sight would come to him and into the church would file those of his friends who were to die during the coming year. In some part of England it was at one time believed that unless every bit of holly is removed from the house by Twelfth-Night some ill luck will happen.

Traditions, customs, we could go on and on. What about the traditions and customs in your own family? Whatever they are, why not add another. Wouldn't it be nice if each of us would make a point of finding someone (outside our usual circle of family and friends) and seeing to it that their Christmas is a bit merrier. Someone to whom we would not ordinarily give a gift or special attention. Maybe you already have this as part of your Christmas, if you do, God Bless You!

Capitol Comments

WASHINGTON - With visits to Appomattox, Buckingham and Cumberland counties arranged for last week, our schedule of workshops for 1977 has been completed. This has been, as always, a rewarding experience for me - as the workshops afford a good opportunity to meet constituents, away from the whirlwind in Washington, and to learn what is on their minds. Some come to seek assistance with problems they have encountered with Federal agencies and others come to share their concerns about legislation before the Congress and problems facing the country.

Your Congressman, from the beginning of his service here - nine years ago - has felt that these sessions serve a very worthwhile purpose, and that they are a two-way street for exchange of information and ideas. If one can be helpful in unwinding some of the red tape in the bureaucracy, one receives a certain inner satisfaction - and each case is followed through in the same manner we pursue written or telephone requests throughout the year. If visitors wish to give their comments in person, we are delighted to hear them. The question arises how do you represent people if you don't know what they think?

Our only regret is that our legislative and committee schedule does not permit us to have our workshops more often. As it is, we have held at least one in every county and city in the Fifth District each year. As the years have worn on, the type of problems with which we deal seems to change, as does the number of visitors increase. We still have a goodly number of Social Security cases and those affecting veterans benefits; military service problems are a frequent subject; and we have noted an increase in immigration, Civil Service and Federal workers' compensation cases. There is an increase in the number of people looking for Federal jobs and more people seem to be going on overseas trips, thus requiring assistance with passports. Government projects, involving funds for such things as watersheds, housing, water and sewage and other needs are more frequent than they once were, perhaps because Washington is siphoning more of the money and expanding its influence.

In our most recent workshops, visitors continued to express concern over our "give-away" of the Panama Canal, over the implications of the Sadat-Begin meeting and regarding our military preparedness. Students at Tunstall High School, in Pittsylvania County and Clover Hill in Chesterfield expressed views and asked questions on national and international matters including the tax aspects of the energy bill, proposed reforms in the welfare system and planned reorganization of the Federal government. As time permits, we are pleased to visit with school groups - both in the District and in Washington - and let it be said that this Member of Congress has faith in the potential of our young students. They are alert, knowledgeable and open in their views - and one gets a sense of reassurance as to what the future holds when someday it falls into their hands.

It encourages me to know that a student is concerned about the outcome of the negotiations in the Middle East and the effect such negotiations will have on our country. It excites me that a 16 year old girl is interested in what strategic materials we import from the Continent of Africa. It is unfavorable rate of exchange in foreign countries has on the domestic economy. It fortifies my own confidence in the American system when a senior says, "you know, it really doesn't matter how much money I have in my pocket. What really counts is what I can exchange that money for in goods and services". It overwhelms me when a science student explains in logical detail not only the necessity but the desirability of converting to solar and nuclear energy and further expresses the futility of continuing down the current path of shortages, higher prices, and more rigid government controls.

It is my conviction that as a Member of Congress, I serve three constituencies - those people in the Fifth District who send me to Washington, the nation as a whole and future generations - and to this end the workshops present this responsibility more infocus than we frequently get across the Potomac. Any idea that most of the county's wisdom - or indeed any substantial part of it - resides in official

Let's Go Shopping - - In Appomattox!

It's Christmas again, and I'm glad! Aren't you? With each chore of shopping, wrapping, cooking and decordating, the feeling of happy anticipation becomes more intense.

Christmas 1977 should be nicer than ever for the people living in and around Appomattox.

Never before has Appomattox had so much to offer shoppers. Add to the old established businesses the new ones that have opened their doors during the past few years, and you have a complete shopping center. By shopping in Appomattox you add to the enjoyment of the holiday season in so many wonderful ways.

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Shopping in Appomattox also means time saved; time for family and friends, time to do all of those things you hadn't been able to fit in the busy schedule. Shop at home and enjoy time saved. You earned it!

Christmas is a most exhilarating time of the year, and all too often it is also the most exhausting time of the year! When you enjoy the convenience of shopping in Appomattox, you save energy; no long tiring drives, no long waiting lines. There are lots of wonderful ways to expend energy other than long, out-of-town, shopping trips.

Last, but by no means least, tax dollars spent at home stay at home; this alone should make us think twice before going out of town to shop.

Take the holiday season in stride, it's that magical, special time of year. Enjoy it, make the most of it, shop at home!

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The TOGA VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPT. will hold open house on Sunday, December 18, 1977, from 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. in recognition of its fifth anniversary.

Congressman Dan Daniel will be the guest speaker and will deliver his address at 3 p.m. Santa Claus is expected around 4 p.m. Refreshments will be served and the public is cordially invited to attend.

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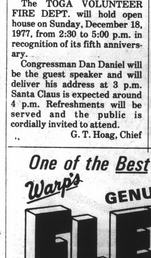
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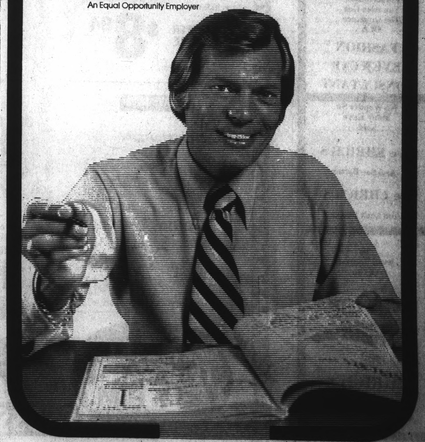

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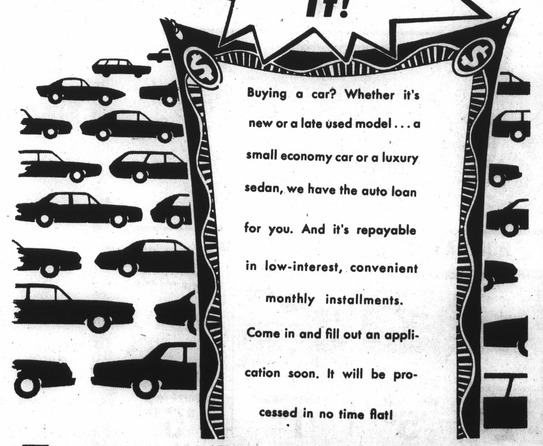

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